

The Loudon-clear guide to... Mid Wales Stages

By Saturday, we'll have been 538 days without any British Rally Championship action. That's 776,806 minutes between the 24th and final Rally Isle of Man stage on September 13, 2014 and the start of Hafren on Saturday. Has there ever been a bigger gap between British Rally Championship stages?*

Headline is, BRC's back this weekend. And it's back with the Mid Wales Stages, an event running at the highest level of British rallying for the first time. Starting the re-born series with an event making a fairly significant step up in status demonstrates the ambition and energy coming out of the MSA BRC right now. That's great news.

Mid Wales Stages... this one really does what it says on the tin. It's a rally with stages in mid-Wales. And we all know what people think of them; what is it Volkswagen driver Jari-Matti Latvala says? He says they're some of the best in the world. He's not wrong.

So, the BRC is definitely coming back on the right roads.

And the rest of the calendar just keeps on delivering: two trips across the Irish Sea, one to the middle of it (Isle of Man for the geographically challenged among you), two to Wales (including this weekend), one to Scotland and one to England.

That means: Mid Wales Stages; Circuit of Ireland (April 8/9); Pirelli Carlisle Rally (April 30/May 1); RSAC Scottish Rally (June 25); Nicky Grist Stages (July 9/10); Ulster Rally (August 19/20) and Rally Isle of Man (September 15-17).

See? Everything's there: classic lanes, Kielder, lovely quick Scottish stages, a retro-style mix of Welsh woods and Epynt and finally, the artist formerly known as the Manx. Douglas is surely *the* place to crown a British Rally Champion.

I had a couple of great years in the BRC with John MacCrone (2010/2011) when we were in a Ford Fiesta R2. Admittedly, we didn't always get the rub of the green, but it was still a great series, with great camaraderie, enthusiastic organisers and, of course, brilliant marshals. All of those boys will be back this weekend.

Now, enough typing: it's time for the first of the seven chapters set to unravel the mystery and unveil the big winners of BRC 2016.

The rally ahead...

MSA British Rally Championship round 1/7

Date: March 5/6

Based: Newtown

Service: Newtown

Stages: 6

Competitive distance: 68.02 miles (109.46km)
Liaison distance: 165.23 miles (265.91km)
Total distance: 233.25 miles (375.37km)
Longest stage: Hafren/Sweet Lamb SS1/5 15.89 miles (25.57km)
Shortest stage: Myherin/Pike's Peak SS6 7.81 miles (12.56km)
Sunrise: 0656
Sunset: 1753

Mid Wales Stages – the lowdown

First run in 1977, this event was originally known as the Tour of Dyfnant. It's moved around a bit, switching from Dyfnant and Aberhirlant to Ceri and Sarnau forests with Radnor run in the same year a Historic event was included for the first time (1994). Latterly, the rally moved to the Sweet Lamb, Hafren, Myherin and Tarenig stages, where it remains today. Graham Middleton and Dave Humphreys are the most successful drivers in the event's history with five wins apiece.

Middleton and Humphreys aside, there are plenty more stars on the list of previous winners, including former British Rally Champions Jimmy McRae and Gwyndaf Evans.

Newtown is bracing itself for a BRC takeover this weekend, with the place set to be overrun by rally cars, crews and fans. And the epicentre? That can be found at The Hafren, just outside Newtown, heading west on the A489. You can't miss it.

Itinerary

Saturday March 5

Start Newtown 1815

SS1 Hafren/Sweet Lamb 15.89 miles (25.57km)

SS2 Pike's Peak/Myherin 9.78 miles (15.73km)

Service Newtown 2057

Sunday March 6

Service Newtown 0800

SS3 Pike's Peak 8.86 miles (14.25km)

SS4 Myherin 9.79 miles (15.75km)

Service Newtown 1048

SS5 Hafren/Sweet Lamb 15.89 (25.57km)

SS6 Myherin/Pike's Peak 7.81 miles (12.56km)

Finish Newtown 1443

Top 10 entries

1 Elfyn Evans/Craig Parry (Ford Fiesta R5)

2 Keith Cronin/Mikie Galvin (DS 3 R5)

3 David Bogie/Kevin Rae (Škoda Fabia R5)

4 Tom Cave/James Morgan (Ford Fiesta R5)

5 Fredrik Åhlin/Morton Abrahamsen (Ford Fiesta R5)

- 6 Euan Thorburn/Paul Beaton (Peugeot 208T16)
- 7 Max Vatanen/Jacques Renucci (Ford Fiesta R5)
- 8 Jamie Anderson/Ross Whittock (Ford Fiesta R5)
- 9 Josh Moffett/John Rowan (Ford Fiesta R5)
- 10 Jonathan Greer/Kirsty Riddick (DS 3 R5)

Stuart's key stage... SS1 Hafren/Sweet Lamb 15.89 miles (25.57km)
It'll be dark. If it's not raining, it won't long have stopped, so the surface will be greasy and probably quite changeable in the level of grip it's offering. And these boys and girls have been sitting around Newtown all day just waiting to get into their cars to get the hammer down. What's called for here is a really cool head and sensible approach. But then again, being too sensible could cost you dearly on the longest stage of the event. So, go hard, but get to the end. Simple!

Stuart will be watching... Keith Cronin #2 DS 3 R5
I've been fortunate enough to co-drive Keith a few times and, for me, he remains one of the most underrated drivers in our sport – a fairly bizarre thing to say for a man who has won the British Rally Championship three times! Keith's not the kind of guy to shout about things, he just gets on and goes quickly. In 2009 we saw him and Mark Higgins go down to the wire on the Bulldog Rally of North Wales; that was a time when Mark was pretty much unbeatable at this level on those roads. Keith won by nine seconds. Watch him go this weekend.

Weather with you:
There's the potential for some light snow at the back end of the week, but that should turn to rain through Saturday. Sunday's looking largely dry with a mixture of sunshine and cloud. But it'll be chilly with six or seven degrees, feeling a touch colder with a bit of windchill.

The rally week:
Friday March 4
0900-1700 recce

Saturday March 5
1100-1430 media accreditation open, The Hafren, Newtown
1100-2300 media centre open, The Hafren
1700 pre-event press conference, auditorium, The Hafren
1815 start, The Hafren

Sunday March 6
0700-2000 media centre open, The Hafren
0800 leg two starts, Newtown
1451 finish, The Hafren
1930 (approximately) provisional results issued

Stuart's restaurant recommendation:

Head to Mirrens Tapas and Steak Bar in Newtown (01686 621120 www.mirrenssteakandtapasbar.co.uk) and try the rib-eye steak cooked on a lava stone which has been heated to 440 degrees – sounds good to me!

Recent British Rally Champions:

2014 Daniel McKenna/Arthur Kierans (DS 3 R3T)
2013 Jukka Korhonen/Marko Salminen (DS3 R3T)
2012 Keith Cronin/Marshall Clarke (DS 3 R3T)
2011 David Bogie/Kevin Rae (Mitsubishi Lancer IX)
2010 Keith Cronin/Barry McNulty (Subaru Impreza)
2009 Keith Cronin/Greg Shinnors (Mitsubishi Lancer Evo IX)
2008 Guy Wilks/Rory Kennedy (Mitsubishi Lancer Evo IX)
2007 Guy Wilks/Phil Pugh (Mitsubishi Lancer Evo IX)
2006 Mark Higgins/Rory Kennedy (Subaru Impreza)
2005 Mark Higgins/Bryan Thomas (Ford Focus RS WRC02)

Stuart Loudon is a semi-professional co-driver who has started 52 rallies, 18 of which are rounds of the World Rally Championship and one of which was with an Ashes-winning English cricketer. He makes biscuits in the family business when he's not working towards his dream of becoming a factory co-driver in the WRC.

** Yes. The 2001 British Rally Championship season was lost to foot and mouth disease. In that case, 577 days passed between the final 2000 event and the start of 2002.*

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